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ABSTRACT

An alternative curriculum for Freshman Composition, designed to help students develop cognitive skills useful for academic writing in other courses, involves eight discipline-specific assignments, building from relatively simple writing tasks such as taking lecture notes and keeping an academic journal, through book reports, essay examinations, and critiques. Eight discrete writing assignments are arranged in an increasingly difficult sequence on the assumptions that most academic writing is in response to reading; that the more rigorous the reading, the better the writing; and that the best reading occurs when there is a strong personal engagement with the text. For all sections, the first essay is diagnostic, while the last essay is a final exam. Assumptions in planning the curriculum were as follows: (1) writing takes a variety of forms; (2) writing must address a variety of audiences; (3) writing is a process; and (4) writing is thinking. (Six references are included.) (JK)

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Freshman English and the Academy: Preparing Students for Writing in the Disciplines

In last December's College Composition and Communication, Leslie Moore and Linda Peterson discuss a problem faced by all faculty who are interested in writing across the curriculum: the increasing discomfort we feel "about the role that English teachers [and their departments] can--and should--play in cross-curricular writing programs." This discomfort, Moore and Peterson argue, "makes us question the extent to which writing teachers, untrained in academic disciplines other than their own, can teach writing 'across the curriculum' and, conversely, the extent to which professors in other disciplines, untrained in rhetoric or composition, can teach writing" (466). One consequence of this discomfort, even at universities that have made a commitment to a cross-discipline writing program, is that the role of the English Department moves behind the scenes and becomes--at most--advisory.

Moore and Peterson, however, suggest one way that an English Department can go beyond the advisory role to strengthen

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student writing in an across-the-curriculum program--and move without threatening faculty in other disciplines who may be uncomfortable about their own abilities to use writing in the classroom. Moore and Peterson focus on the development of the Freshman English Curriculum, in their case-at Yale--a curriculum based on an understanding of how conventions operate in written discourse. It is a related Freshman English curriculum that I plan to discuss today, also addressing myself to how that curriculum can more efficiently aid students on their way into the academy.

During the spring of 1985, with help from a grant from our University's Faculty Advancement Center, I worked to develop a curriculum for Freshman Reading and Writing that--like the curriculum of Moore and Peterson--would be compatible "with the aims of writing across the curriculum and with the English Department's sense of its traditional concerns" (466). The curriculum is designed to help students develop cognitive skills useful for the academic writing they will do in other courses. It incorporates a number of writing-to-learn activities, uses writing assignments that involve students in their reading for other courses, and aims to show students, in a specific and direct way, how the writing activities of Freshman English can be adapted throughout the academy. The curriculum involves several discipline-specific assignments, building from relatively simple writing tasks such as taking lecture notes and keeping an academic journal, through book reports, essay examinations, and critiques, to a consideration of the different perspectives--the

questions and methodologies--used by various disciplines. In planning the curriculum, I was guided by four assumptions that I take to be common to the pedagogy that informs our current teaching of writing. While these assumptions will not be new to any of you, I would like to quickly review them, to sketch how they informed my planning.

The first assumption on which I operated was that writing takes a variety of forms. Thus, among others, Frank d'Angelo has argued that "writing should not be the imposing of form upon content but rather the adapting of the form to the expression" (161) and Jack Selzer that teachers "must expose students to a variety of composing styles and actions," that "students must practice those composing options themselves," and that "students need guidance in mastering and selecting among composing possibilities" (282). Instead of relying on the traditional 500-word essay then, I incorporated a variety of forms in my assignments--letters, reviews, critiques, essay examinations, debates--forcing students to try, during the course of the semester, a variety of openings, lengths, vocabularies, tones, organizations, and conclusions, adjusting these in their papers to audience and purpose.

Therefore, the second assumption on which I operated was that writing must address a variety of audiences. I agreed with Mimi Schwartz that faculty in other disciplines may well have different agendas from ours in English--and not to recognize these different agendas sends "mixed messages across the curriculum" to our students, messages that make students "rely on a generalized

rhetoric, independent of context, rather than try to decipher what seem to them unbreakable codes" (61). I thus tried to include in my assignments an opportunity to write for instructors in different disciplines. In the typical Freshman English class, we encourage students to use the active rather than the passive voice to make writing more forceful and direct; we encourage students to use the first person pronoun to develop a sense of voice. But such preferences run counter to much writing in business, for example, where self is effaced, or in science, where faculty discourage the use of I in lab reports.

Briefly, my third assumption was that writing is a process, and I thus worked not only to include active engagement--in class--in steps from invention to correction, but also to address the process as it worked its way out in various forms: invention in producing an out-of-class critique, for example, is very different from invention in writing an essay examination.

The final assumption, that writing is thinking, has been unquestionably the most important in shaping the radical transformation of composition pedagogy over the past several decades--and it was certainly most important for me in my own planning. We understand that writing not only records what our students have learned but also is a tool "for discovering, for shaping meaning, and for reaching understanding," as Toby Fulwiler and Art Young, among many others, have argued (x). Thus, I incorporated in my curriculum not only a variety of forms that could function as heuristics, but also a variety of invention techniques to generate ideas beyond the surface of the obvious.

More importantly, I worked to arrange these assignments in a sequence that would encourage the development of "discursive maturity," to use Janice Hays' term (127).

While not drawing on the precise chronology of cognitive development described by Jean Piaget, James Britton, and others, I attempted a sequence of increasingly difficult assignments, moving from the concrete and immediate to the more abstract, from the summary to the synthesis and the critique, from a view of education as the acquisition of repeatable facts to a view of education as a stimulus to interpret, evaluate, and become committed. My scheme owes its greatest debt to the work of William Perry, used by Hays to analyze the cognitive development of twelve college students. The scheme traces students who, upon entry to college, "perceive the world in dualistic terms of right-and-wrong, good-and-bad," to a stage where they perceive "'all knowledge and values (including authority's) as contextual and relativistic'" (128). Movement through the intermediate stages, Hays argues, should be based on a developmental perspective that dictates our teaching "discursive and syntactic structures appropriate to the discourse level just <u>above</u> the one [students] have achieved even though they will initially perform poorly at the level" (142). At each stage of the curriculum I tried, there <u>were</u> students who had difficulty moving on, but because early assignments build on the preceding ones, most caught up.

Finally, in designing an alternative curriculum for our Freshman Reading and Writing, I wanted to remain as consistent

as possible with the departmental requirement that students write eight essays of 500 words each; thus I worked on eight discrete writing assignments, although the content, form, and length were significantly different from my assignments in earlier semesters. For all sections, the first essay is to be diagnostic; the last essay, a final exam. I used the diagnostic essay to encourage students to begin thinking about their own writing, adapting an exercise from Art Young's writing-across-the-curriculum workshops. Students selected and described a memorable writing experience; then their first out-of-class assignment was to complete a reading and writing inventory, in which, among other things, they indicated the courses in which they were enrolled and the kinds of reading and writing they expected to do for each.

Essay II was designed to help students adapt summarizing skills and bring strong personal responses to the reading for all their courses. We worked together on annotating, paraphrasing, and summarizing several short essays in our reader, then used those summaries to stimulate free writing, brainstorming, and questioning about the essay topic. Students began a double-entry academic journal in which they applied these skills to the reading for their other courses, also keeping in their journals responses to the class lectures, particularly an assessment of how their lecture material related to the reading they had done. Essay II became a letter home, either to their parents or to a high school teacher, in which they gave a sense of what they were finding academically exciting

about their first weeks in school. Perhaps surprisingly, the most difficult part of this unit, in the early drafts of the letter, was sense of audience, for most students wrote letters that were far stuffier than any they would ever have sent their parents. Nevertheless, most students who had difficulty at this stage calling forth a personal response to their reading and communicating that personal response had mastered the sense of audience by the end of the semester.

Essay III continued work with the academic journal, but in this case to help students prepare for an essay examination in one of their courses. Students selected a class on which to concentrate, moving the focus beyond response to an analytical consideration of what major points should be reviewed for an exam. We discussed format for an essay answer, giving close attention to the differences in such terms as analyze, classify, compare, contrast, criticize, define, etc. To anticipate tests, students wrote sample essay questions, from which I picked one for them to respond to as Essay III. In assigning a grade for this essay, I considered primarily student preparation for and presentation of the answer--basing the grade on such elements as the journal, anticipation of possible exam questions, use of scratch outlines, and clear thesis in the essay, with clear organization and transitions between sections. During both semesters in which I have used this curriculum, the sample essay is the exercise students have picked out as most helpful to them in their other courses; students volunteer that writing it helped them get an A on their history midterm, for example.

Subsequent essays--IV through VII--were based on a reader already available to our composition faculty: the Behrens-Rosen collection, Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum--although any of the several other cross-discipline readers might have served as well. (Like Moore and Peterson, I find all these readers too skimpy on actual academic writing, too filled with essays written for popular magazines.) For Essay IV, after reading the unit "Morality and the Movies," students devised their own movie code, compared it to the Motion Picture Codes of 1930 and 1968, and then applied the code to a recent movie of their choice; they presented this code, with justification, to their peers, again an attempt to integrate the academy with life, but this time more analytically than in Essay II, because students had to establish a definition, with a classification system, and then apply it.

Building on this foundation, students in Essay V began a consideration of differences in the academic disciplines. They read--in the unit "Fairy Tales: A Closer Look at 'Cinderella'"--both several versions of the Cinderella tale and interpretations of that tale from the perspectives of psychology, sociology, history, and marketing. They were asked to decide which perspective interested them most, to imagine that they would like to major in the discipline that operated from that perspective, and to write a statement, for an admissions committee, in which they explained why the approach of the discipline, as they understood it from the reading of the fairy tale, interested them.

Essays VI and VII drew on units in the reader dealing with nuclear war and obedience to authority, using selections from a variety of disciplines, including psychology, political science, law, theology, and astronomy. In Essay VI, students were asked to criticize the effectiveness of one of the arguments presented on the inevitability of nuclear war, challenging one discipline from the perspective of another and presenting their critique in a letter to the editor of the university newspaper. Having taken a stand on the seriousness of the nuclear threat, they were then asked to consider whether they would support civil disobedience in working to bring about the particular policy they thought would be most successful in averting nuclear war. To develop their argument, students again had to draw from more than one discipline, but now by working to integrate the arguments in an interdisciplinary perspective.

These final two essays were undoubtedly the most difficult, requiring students both to use more than one discipline and to consider questions not easy for any of us to answer. Nevertheless, most students addressed the assignment with the seriousness it required; while some complained about the difficulty of the reading, most commented--in their evaluations--on the importance of considering significant questions. Students selected both the critique of an essay on nuclear war and the synthesis of several disciplines in considering civil disobedience as the second most valuable exercise in developing skills useful in their university

experience. A final exam then took students through the steps of the writing process by having them respond to a short reading assignment.

All these assignments but the first three--and the final--were, of course, dependent upon a particular reader, but the skills involved and the progression with which they were addressed could easily be adapted. The sequence begins with development of reading skills of personal involvement, annotation, paraphrase, and summary--on the assumptions that most academic writing is in response to reading; that the more rigorous the reading, the better the writing; and that the best reading occurs when there is a strong personal engagement with the text. The curriculum continues with development of the synthesis and critique by asking students to consider how reading and writing expectations differ in different disciplines, to evaluate the arguments of one discipline from the perspective of another, and to integrate the arguments of more than one discipline--encouraging students to see that different disciplines demand different perspectives and to begin the process of determining the perspective of most interest to them.

While students almost unanimously found the curriculum helpful or extremely helpful in developing skills that they believed would be asked for in their university experience, the real test was the extent to which they continued to use writing to learn in their other classes. One important aim for me had been to use Freshman English to establish

writing habits that students would continue to draw on, even if faculty in other courses did not demand writing activities. Here the report was mixed. In a follow-up questionnaire the semester after I first used the curriculum, some sample responses included these: 64 percent of the students who responded indicated they continued to annotate their reading and prepare summaries; 71 percent said they continued to ask for peer reviews of their papers; 70 percent that they continued to free write and use brainstorming exercises. However, while every student, not surprisingly, continued to take lecture notes, only a disappointing 14 percent incorporated these into a double-entry journal, including personal responses.

Such statistics, of course, provoke questions. Without extended work on summarizing, for example, what percentage of the students would have written reading summaries anyway? How should student perceptions affect our curriculum planning? When I asked students at the end of the semester what writing forms they had used in other classes, personal reaction in a double-entry journal was used by fewer than 20 percent--far behind lecture notes, summaries, essay exams, and so on. The disappointing 14 percent who continued to keep a journal after it was no longer required should then have been no surprise. Nevertheless, I remain committed to the importance of personal engagement with the text and plan to continue to encourage it through the journal.

There are also long-term questions that remain important.

For example, did the emphasis on differences in the questions and methodologies help students any more effectively through the academy? It remains too early to tell. Nevertheless, like Moore and Peterson, I believe freshman writing can be used more efficiently than it often is to help students consciously address ways that will prepare them to be better writers in their other discipline courses. An unexpected benefit--at least for me--is that the new, more rigorous substantive content of Freshman English--tied to the academic disciplines--makes the teaching of composition even more exciting and challenging.

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